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Sikhs Rising In Queens Political Fray

BY ELIZABETH SOLOMONT - Special to the Sun

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If not for the multitude of framed snapshots of lawmakers hanging on the walls, the political headquarters of Harjinder Singh Duggal would resemble the most ordinary home office. But inside the second-floor Queens residence that serves as a base for one of the borough's newest elected officials, celebrity snapshots jockey for empty wall space, a testament to the political ambition of the apartment's occupant. In one, a smiling Mr. Duggal poses with Mayor Giuliani. In another, Mayor Bloomberg. Also, President Clinton and Senator Clinton.

Politics, he said, "It's in my blood."

Mr. Duggal is one of five members of the Sikh community recently elected to the Queens County Democratic Committee, a breakthrough for the community in New York politics. Prompted to run for office by a desire to combat the discrimination they have experienced since September 11, 2001, the election signals their acceptance in local politics and reflects their ambition for civic involvement. To date, few Sikhs had been elected to public office in any political race, and in New York City, political insiders said the Sikh community previously asserted itself by donating to campaigns of local lawmakers.

"What you're seeing to some extent is a rise to power of a new immigrant group," a political consultant, Scott Levenson, said.

"The Sikh community in New York are one of the most isolated minorities here in terms of their physical appearance, certainly they stand out with turbans and beards, so for the Sikhs to then enter into the political process, I think in many ways can break the barriers that some of the other immigrants face," the director of the Grassroots Initiative, a civic group, Jeff Merritt, said.

For the five – including Mr. Duggal, as well as Master Mohinder Singh, Harpreet Singh Wahan, Gurmej Singh, and Dhan Singh – the election also represents an immigrant's journey.

In Mr. Duggal's case, job opportunities led the 63-year-old Indian native to America in the early 1980s, where he settled in Queens and drove a gypsy cab for six months to make ends meet. Mr. Duggal subsequently worked as a linguist, translator, and newsstand operator.

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But with politically active relatives in India, Mr. Duggal also became a community activist in local community boards starting in 1993. Over the years he lobbied for the Americans with Disabilities Act, and various local issues affecting taxi drivers, immigrants, and the South Asian community.

Among other Sikh officials in New York — home to between 10,000 and 50,000 Sikhs — fighting intolerance of Sikhs is also a common refrain. "If we are in the political process, people will know better about us, and at the same time, we can give our input," a newly elected representative and a past president of the Sikh Cultural Society in Queens, Mohinder Singh, said.

Still, members of the Sikh community said until now they had been interacting with government mostly from the outside. "They are the most humble positions an elected official could possibly have, but it's a start," the legal director of the Sikh Coalition, Amardeep Singh, said.

Indeed, a former elected official and India native observed that political interest among the local Sikh community is growing fast. "They're realizing it's very important to them," a past representative of the 25th Assembly district, Uma Sengupta, said.

In the recent election, Sikh candidates received support from city lawmakers, including Queens County Democratic Committee leaders committed to diversity. "It is an important step forward for the Sikh American community," City Councilman John Liu said.

Mr. Duggal, who supported Mr. Liu in his City Council bid several years ago, agreed. "I go everywhere with my turban and show them I am a Sikh," he said. "I will interact with different elected officials with this post and I can tell them the issues we are facing."

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